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ABSTRACT

This study explores assumptions about teacher motivations and why teachers choose one course of action rather than another in problematic situations. The question asked is: "What do teachers take into account when faced with such situations and how do they choose a line of action? Data sources include publications distributed by unions, district and school-site administration, professional associations, and subject departments, as well as field notes from meetings and interviews with teachers. It was found that four variables: Class Gain, Student Gain, Teacher Gain, and Societal Gain, operate simultaneously in teachers' decision making. Class Gain, however, is the primary perspective from which teachers' decisions flow. They consider that if the class is functioning well, individual students as well as the teacher benefit from the peaceful learning environment. When the class as a whole makes more academic progress this benefits the teacher, the individual students, the class, and the society. (JD)

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HIGH-SCHOOL TEACHER DECISIONS IN PROBLEMATIC SITUATIONS

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HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER DECISIONS IN PROBLEMATIC SITUATIONS

This is a study of how high school teachers make decisions in problematic situations. Its goal is to explore assumptions about teacher motivations and to generate hypotheses about why teachers choose one course of action rather than another. The working assumptions of this study are 1) that teachers are the gatekeepers to improving the schools, and 2) that they desire to improve the profession and their own personal teaching. Yet, educational research shows that teachers often do not implement new approaches in their classrooms even when they have received specific training for them and indicate that they are in favor of the change. This raises the question: What do teachers take into account when faced with problematic situations? How do they choose a line of action? This study is exploratory rather than a testing of hypotheses. The framework is phenomenological, drawing on interpretation of the meaning that teachers attach to objects and events.

Methodology

The research design is ethnographic. Responses from initial entry into the field suggested that teacher communication about their ways of thinking and coping take place at professional association meetings, department meetings, lunch, and staff lounges. Field research was conducted over nine months in four high schools and two junior high schools. The researcher had conversations with teachers in faculty lounges, lunch rooms, and classrooms. More formal interviews and observations were conducted through attendance at monthly department meetings at each school throughout the academic year, classroom observations, and scheduled interviews. In addition, the researcher attended national and

regional teacher conferences and subscribed to newsletters and journals for classroom teachers.

A grounded theory approach was employed for data collection and analysis. Categories were formulated through a process of identifying similarities and differences in teachers' descriptions of their task of teaching, seeking to understand how they constructed a line of action. In this way, categories were identified and integrated through constant comparison. Categories were validated through triangulation by consulting documents and publications in addition to the interviews and participant observation. Data sources included publications distributed by unions, district and school-site administration, professional associations, and subject departments, as well as field notes from meetings and interviews with teachers.

MOULDING A CLASS

When high school teachers face a crowd of thirty or so teenagers, their minds are racing through a series of decisions about the best ways to fashion this crowd into a "class" - a social world with understood patterns of behavior. Even after patterns have been established in the first few weeks of the school year, the moods of individuals and of the group are so fluid that the teacher engages in a continuous stream of decision-making about his or her next step in controlling the progress of the group. These decisions include such diverse elements as where to seat students, when to introduce a new concept, at what point it is more disruptive to send a student out of class rather than let him or her continue rude behavior, what will interest this group, or how much control this group needs for an optimum learning environment in general and on a particular day:

> It's such a multitude of experiences that you have from day to day. Every day is a different experience. I may give them something to work on, for example, and they do so beautifully and with so much enthusiasm that I am really surprised. Sometimes I give them simple work and I'm shocked because it's over their heads! What is most frustrating is the apathy [of some classes] - a total lack of interest in themselves and in what's going on around them. That is the biggest challenge, to design the course on a day to day basis so they get involved.

Teachers use lesson plans as a general outline, but spontaneously change them to meet unforeseen circumstances or have a "Plan B" for anticipated contingencies:

> Even if another group is presenting a skit, they'll pay attention for just so long, and then lose it. I gave a written assignment today, and I passed a sheet of paper out that had the vocabulary on it. In a way it was to see if they had grasped anything yesterday. But the main reason was that I knew, after doing the review orally, that those kids were going to get tired and my usually disruptive ones would start. So, immediately, I had the quiz ready. And it was just perfect timing!

This teacher had anticipated when problems would arise, then made a series of quick calculations of gains and losses as the lesson progressed.

WHAT TEACHERS TAKE INTO ACCOUNT

Whereas the calculations that teachers engage in during classtime are spontaneous decisions, more deliberate calculations are involved in planning the curriculum, their personal class schedule, their personal lives, and how to get the administration to meet their needs, both personal and professional. Analysis of the data produced four basic perspectives that guide teachers' decisions: 1. Class Gain, 2. Student Gain, 3. Teacher Gain, and 4. Societal Gain.

Class Gain

Class Gain is a calculation of what will enhance the welfare of a class, a particular group of students which meets at the same

time every day. This perspective is prevalent in teacher-centered classrooms where instruction is led through group activities such as lectures, supervised exercises, and oral interaction. Teachers note that each class forms a social world with its own peculiar pattern of behavior during that class period, its own personality and its own needs.

The conversation of teachers with each other reveals a tendency to take a social world perspective, to discern distinguishing characteristics of groups of students. They refer to a "good first-period class" as opposed to a "bad third-period class" and may move individuals from one class period to another to change the composition of the group and thereby the patterns of behavior of the social world in which the individual was a problem. In recounting the tale of getting a counselor to remove a student from one class, the teacher said, "You know, you can have a class where there are just a couple of [difficult] personalities, and having them gone changes the whole atmosphere of the class." Another teacher said -

> The classes tended to have their own personalities. The second period class was a very wonderful class. The third period class was full of kids that had been fighting with each other for the last nine years in school. They all knew each other from way back, had antagonisms from way back, fooled around from way back. So that was a difficult one to weed out and work with.

In planning lessons and placing students each teacher weighs the benefits to him- or herself in the light of benefits to the individual student and to the class or classes involved.

Sometimes a "bad apple" will spoil whatever class he or she is in. The teacher may then make an assessment of the feasibility of moving the troublemaker to another class and the probable effect that will have on the disrupted class, the student, and the

presently well-functioning class. Frequently, a student moved into the different social world of another class will find the new group less receptive to a newcomer's antics and will give up some of his or her disruptive ways in response to peer pressure.

Mr. "Mathteacher" explained that welfare of the group takes precedence in his decision-making because:

> The individual can't be as important as the group. Given the condition of a ratio of 30 to 1, the teacher's expertise reaches more students and has a greater impact when the class is working well together. When it isn't, everyone loses.

In this balance which the classroom teacher strives to attain, Class Gain takes precedence. Nevertheless, decisions may sometimes be made primarily for the sake of an individual student.

Student Gain

Student Gain is a perspective of which the target is the welfare of an individual student. One veteran teacher, Mrs. "Oldpro", gave two examples where "moving them into another environment" had benefited the teacher, the troubled class, and the individual without harm to the class the student was moved into. In one instance a particular girl was spoiling the learning environment of a colleague's class and getting on the teacher's nerves to the point of distraction. Out of compassion for the student who was a senior and needed to stay in school to graduate, the colleague did not want to get the girl suspended, so she asked Mrs. "Oldpro" to accept the troublemaker into her class which met during the same period. Mrs. "Oldpro" explained:

> I could sympathize with her because there's some that I want out of my class and I wish there was some place I could send the student. So I talked to the counselor and said, 'Look, I'll take her as long as you make it clear to the student that the first time I have any problems with her, she's out.' She came in and is actually doing better than some of the students who've been there since September. But see, now she's got the pressure on her

> that I don't have to put up with her. So I wish I could do the same thing with some more of my students - move them into another environment. My feeling is, if you could just move them around, they don't have to be kicked out of school. That's why I agreed to take this student. And it worked.

In the second instance Mrs. "Oldpro" had a student, Michael, who was intolerably disruptive in her lower-track class, but she thought she might be able to save that class from chaos and avoid getting the student suspended if she could "get the student out of that environment, that chemistry that's going on there." So she had the idea of moving Michael into her college-bound class even though it was filled to capacity with forty-one students and in spite of the fact that the boy was failing the less academically demanding class. Her first step was to call Michael's parents:

> That was one of the fortunate conferences I had where the mother was very concerned. When I told her that he was acting up, his mother said, `Well, he says the class is boring and he knows all of that.' And I immediately said, `That's right! You know, maybe he shouldn't be in the easier class." I got her to agree to put him into my college-bound class.

Mrs. "Oldpro" was running several risks in these interactions with the parents, the student, and with the social worlds of the two classes. She was running the risk of: 1) an unpleasant confrontation with the parents, 2) not improving the original class, 3) upsetting the stability of her overcrowded higher track class, and 4) criticism by school-site administrators. Mrs. "Oldpro" also had to take into account that Michael might fail the more difficult class, in which case his parents would be angry and the teacher would have to justify her decision and again decide what to do with him. Fortunately, the student improved scholastically as well as in citizenship in the new environment:

> Now I know that this student will never be a "B" student in my academic group. But I felt I should just get him out of the other class because if he stayed there he

> would be an "F" student. Now that he's in my 1, he's about a "D+" and probably could move up to a "C". But the main thing is he doesn't have the same chemistry going on there. Everybody there is basically serious about doing their work. Number one, I've eliminated the behavior problem, and secondly, I see now that he's quiet, he's grasping the material a little better.

This teacher weighed all of the risks and benefits of moving the student and decided to take the risks. In fact the lower-track class did become a more cohesive social unit and was able to get on with the learning enterprise. If the parents had become defensive about their teenager's behavior, this could typically result in meetings with the parents and with the principal or other administrators. Such a loss of valuable time is counted as a Teacher Loss among teachers, even if the teacher's actions are vindicated. For this reason, Teacher Gain is sometimes incompatible with district procedures such as this district's requirement that teachers must call parents. But in this case, the teacher gained the support of the parents for her strategy. She was correct in her assessment that the move would result in Class Gain and Teacher Gain. Gain to the individual student was also a gamble which turned out to be favorable.

Teacher Gain

Teacher Gain may be either personal or collegial. A typical example in which the personal aspect of Teacher Gain won over considerations of Class Gain was an instance where the teacher had the class go through routine activities because she, the teacher, needed some tranquillity: "On the day when I was up all night because my daughter was sick, I had them read the textbook and act it out and copy the vocabulary. I chose some unstressful activity for me. But I don't consider that my best teaching."

In an instance where collegial Teacher Gain weighed more heavily in the balance, a teacher agreed to teach a difficult lower-track class for one more year even though she had already "taken her turn" in the department teaching this class which "nobody wanted." She had volunteered to the department chairman to swap her college-bound class with another teacher who had a lower-track class that period and who begged her to "please take it" from her. Besides helping a colleague, an additional incentive was that she had been asked by the district specialist to participate in writing a district-wide test for that course. She explained her reasons for volunteering by saying, "I didn't feel that it was OK to write a test or develop a test for a class that I'm not presently working in or teaching." Her gain was personal to the extent that it was in line with her perception of her role as a professional. (It was not that she expected any reward for this task, since teachers seldom receive much recognition for their work on district tests.) She continued her explanation of taking this burden on herself by saying: "No, it was not my turn...but I think in terms of saving another teacher's teaching career, it might have been a good gesture." Teacher Gain in this instance was to a colleague and to the furtherance of her subject in the district curriculum.

Societal Gain

Here there is a difference. While Class Gain, Student Gain, and Teacher Gain enter into daily decision-making, considerations of Societal Gain are most prominent when teachers engage in curriculum planning. "Curriculum planning" embraces several types of activities: 1) discussing and writing curriculum guides, 2) lobbying for a particular curriculum (including textbook and

methodology) in your subject, and 3) lobbying for your subject in the school curriculum. These activities take place at all levels: school-site, district, state, and national.

For this segment of the study, the researcher examined teacher planning activities in bringing about a foreign language graduation requirement. The foreign language curriculum was chosen for analysis of this perspective because of the researcher's familiarity with that field. The movement to require foreign language for high school graduation was spurred by concern voiced in A Nation At Risk over the United States falling behind other nations. It was supported at the state level by professional associations of foreign language teachers. In California, for example, the California Foreign Language Teachers Association (CFLTA) promoted the foreign language requirement by conveying teacher sentiment and rationale to the state department of education and by lobbying the state legislature. Their efforts were successful in that the California legislature made a course in foreign language or fine arts a requirement for high school graduation in Senate Bill 813, passed in 1983. In some districts, teachers carried their campaign for increasing the influence of foreign language in the school curriculum by taking proposals to the school board to make it an absolute requirement. In two districts they obtained a district-wide mandate that all students must study foreign language to graduate.

Foreign language teachers' reasons to support the new requirement were derived from perspectives of Student Gain, Societal Gain, and Teacher Gain. Their rationale for a universal foreign language requirement was that it would result in gain for 1) foreign language teachers in general and for themselves in

particular, by expanding the foreign language program and ensuring their job security; 2) the individual student, by broadening the student's horizons; 3) the society, by expanding the base of equity and educating children from minority groups to participate more intelligently in our democratic society and pluralistic world. For example, here are two teachers' views of the aims of the foreign language graduation requirement:

> Mr. White: "I think in the overall perception of the world, kids, especially here in the inner city, need to have a broader view of world cultures, and anything that's going to bring them that kind of larger perspective can be valuable."
>
> Ms. Day: "I wasn't sitting in on the meeting where they made the decision [to establish a foreign language requirement for graduation from high school in this district], but I would think that they considered the ethnic diversity of California and of this city in particular. Knowledge of foreign languages and cultures and peoples is an important part of a high school education and you wouldn't be deemed a fully educated person without an exposure to other languages and cultures."

The victory for foreign languages in the curriculum was later perceived as a mixed blessing by the teachers because foreign language classes now had non-college-bound students in them. Foreign language teachers found it stressful to teach students who had different norms of behavior from their usual college-bound classes. This situation illustrates a case where tensions became more apparent between competing perspectives of Teacher Gain - personal versus collegial - and Teacher Gain versus Societal Gain.

CONCLUSIONS

Teachers in schools face numerous uncertainties in their daily work - from the "ebb and flow of student response" (Lortie, 1975) in the classroom to the uncertainty of job security in the flux of public support for their subject in the curriculum or collegial

support for the particular curriculum which they espouse in their subject. Teachers engage in quick calculations of gains and losses throughout the school day in dealing with each new situation that arises. In daily decisions about curriculum and placing of students, the teacher weighs the benefits to him- or herself in the light of benefits to the individual student and to the class or classes involved. In broader-based decisions about aims and objectives of the curriculum the teacher takes into account the benefits to the society as well as to his or her subject and personal objectives. Even though the four variables, Class Gain, Student Gain, Teacher Gain, and Societal Gain, operate simultaneously in their decision-making, Class Gain is the primary perspective from which teachers' decisions flow. They consider that if the class is functioning well, individual students as well as the teacher benefit from the peaceful learning environment. When the class as a whole makes more academic progress this benefits the teacher, the individual students, the class, and the society.

Implications

This study illuminates our understanding of what high school teachers take into account in making decisions and the context-specific nature of their task. The findings suggest that research on high school teachers' thinking needs to be expanded beyond examining instructional decisions that relate to needs of an individual student. Teaching is more than organized presentation of content by a teacher to students: it consists of interaction between teacher, student, class, and multiple social worlds. This study brings to light that aspect of teaching which creates meaning through interaction among various human groups, not just

interaction between teacher and students. Through this perspective we can see teaching as an act of creating an environment for a particular subject matter to make it "user-friendly" to a particular group of students.

Some questions are raised for possible further research:

1. How does this model of teacher thinking fit with current research on teaching and learning? For example -
   - Reflective teaching and teacher planning
   - Vygotskian and Soviet activity theory
2. What further analyses of these categories can give us a more complete picture of how teachers create their social world?
3. In the social world model where human groups are seen as mini-cultures, is the anthropological concept of empowerment of oppressed groups applicable to teacher empowerment?
4. What professional preparation/development best prepares teachers, counselors, and administrators for this interactional activity?

It is always difficult to know in advance what applications will be found for basic research that generates hypotheses. The categories of teacher decision-making presented in this paper should find applications in various arenas of educational practice - educational administration, counseling, professional and staff development, as well as teacher education. It is up to the practitioners and experts in the various disciplines to extend new knowledge into their fields and shape our consciousness to encompass the complexity of the educational enterprise.

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